

CHEIM & READ

BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS AND CULTURE

Jonathan Lasker with John Yau

by John Yau

Shortly before Jonathan Lasker's show opened at Cheim and Read on March 29th, on view till May 5th, 2007, *Rail* Editor John Yau stopped by his studio to talk about his recent paintings.

John Yau (Rail): Let's begin with the painting "Scenic Remembrance"

Jonathan Lasker (Lasker): (The title refers to the fact that if you think of it as a picture, it is very much landscape in its reference. There's a definite horizon line.



Portrait of the artist, by Chris Burnside.

Rail:* There are two forms sitting on a horizon line. The linear form on the right side extends below it, while the form on the left seems to sit on top of it.

Lasker: Right, I think that that linear form is almost a plant-like form growing out of it, and then there's a very large sort of scribbly black head-like form behind a very thick, white form that comes forward. That's the most literal kind of reading, and this painting of all the paintings in the show is perhaps the most literal, or the one that you could most easily make literal associations with because they're all definitely abstract paintings.

Rail: Right, but you want literal associations up to a point.

Lasker: Up to a point. Actually, it's kind of interesting because Stephen Westfall once wrote in a review, these questions ask the viewer what the

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viewer asks about abstract painting: What's that supposed to represent? Or what's that supposed to be? And they get the viewer started on some of those kinds of conjectures and also the whole conjecturing of how you form a picture in your mind.

Rail: Let's talk about the linear structure. Somehow it occupies a zone where the line doesn't seem fast or slow, but in between, and that in between automatically questions assumptions about how a line is made or how anything is made. Because the other lines in the painting, like the black dense structure, is like a quick scribble, but that doesn't seem quite right either because it isn't that quick. It feels quick on one level, and not that quick on another. In both cases, it's a duality.

Lasker: That's really true. But actually what's going on is that they're both. Like how the linear brown line is done—I start out with an idea of what kind of form I want to create in my mind, and then I draw it freehand very fast; it's somewhat automatic in its nature, but then later on it gets painted—I do that with a china marker on the surface of the painting. I trace that line with paint in such a way that it's very consciously painted, and also the edges of the line are very fine and clean, so it's painted very slowly. So the execution is both fast and slow. Like the drawing of it takes maybe half an hour, while the painting of it takes probably a day. And then with the black line—I'm also trying to arrive at a shape that I have in mind, and so the boundaries of that form are very conscious and very slow, but then the interior line is a fast doodle. And it takes on the signature characteristics in doodling that we all have—we all doodle differently based on personality traits.

Rail: You said at one point that there are rules in your paintings.

Lasker: Well, yeah, I'm very conscious of if there's a horizon line, I'm very conscious of edge, of what happens when forms are planted at the bottom edge—that they tend to foreground into actual space or suggest a continuation. I'm conscious of what happens when the surface is filled all over and what happens when it's open, and what that openness implies and how that might resonate in a metaphorical or literal way.



Jonathan Lasker. SCENIC REMEMBRANCE, 2007. Oil on linen. 90×120 inches. 228.6×304.8 centimeters CR# LS.13934 Courtesy Cheim & Read.

Rail: You want both the metaphor and the literal.

Lasker: Yes, and I want them both to be present sometimes in mutual contradiction.

Rail: The other thing I wanted to bring up –I have to read the painting both tactilely and visually, and you always seem to be bringing these two different ways of experiencing the world into one painting, without saying one is more important than the other; that somehow painting isn't just ocular, it's also a physical interaction that we have, so we become conscious of the surface. Part of the meaning of a painting is that we interact with the world both sensually and visually; it's not one or the other.

Lasker: Right. It is both, but it also both reiterates and contradicts certain things that have become known about painting that had rather firmly established themselves when I began making paintings, sort of the beginning of this body of work, really about 30 years ago, just after minimalism had, to my mind, emptied out the picture plane. After minimalism, you reached a cul-de-sac, where the painters who proceeded after minimalism felt that they could no longer make a painting because how do you make an image after it's been exposed as illusionism. Where do you go from there? These paintings got started not so much as a commentary on abstract expressionism or styles of modernism but as a kind of answer to minimalism. I thought how could you make a painting which could be viewed literally yet at the same time could imply metaphor, image, pictorialism, etc, the components of narrative yet without giving a narrative.

Rail: One of the things that happened early on is you brought two different vocabularies, a geometric vocabulary and a biomorphic vocabulary, and put them together in the earliest works that I first saw.

Lasker: Right, a lot of those paintings had bar shapes in them; they took on configurations, as well as suggested a possible vanishing point perspective because they tended to contract in length suggesting a deeper space, but at the same time they didn't shrink in width. They remained these bars that could suggest deep space but didn't have to. The idea was to give two possible readings at once.

Rail: You wanted contradictions without irony.

Lasker: Well how we form pictures in our mind. And why when we're looking at a flat, two-dimensional surface we begin to see pictures, because we're really not looking at a landscape, we're looking at marks on a surface.

The idea was to take what minimalism had done, which was to reiterate that reality, and at the same time sort of beat it at its own game. That was why I began doing the paintings I'm doing. They still hold a lot of the physical aspects of minimalism in the sense that I think of a lot of the forms as being things of paint, things on top of other things, things that seem like they could walk out into real space.

Rail: So you're inviting interpretation.

Lasker: Exactly. The works are intended to be hermeneutic.

Rail: I feel like "Reason and Free Will" is a portrait that's missing a portrait. That thick white shape; it's a head, and at the same time, it's white and impasto, there and not there.

Lasker: The white kind of works to suggest vacancy, and at the same time the materiality of the form reiterates its presence. I think of it almost like a surrogate form, like this is almost a surrogate portrait or something of that nature. But the vacancy of that form really did interest me.

Rail: Then you feel like there's an upper part and a lower part, with the white going down into the lower part. The minute you start to make those associations, there's a sense of an above-ground landscape and a below-ground landscape, and if you see that in terms of portraiture, or a head, and you think how do we know somebody? Your painting enables us to gain access to that kind of speculative thinking.

Lasker: You're right, they're not just flat paintings. None of the mark making is intended to be purely flat, it's all intended to have associations.

Rail: It's interesting that you said minimalism because "Reason and Free Will" is extremely busy, with this calm center, like the calm in the middle of a storm.

Lasker: It gives you a very strong contradiction; you go from a very active ground to an extremely mute form, and it's an extremely simple painting in its way, but to me, in this painting, the ground really carries it, and then the muteness of the form I think is really interesting. Up until now, I've mostly done something with an articulation in the interior of the forms; something to activate the forms. This show will have a couple of paintings where the forms are essentially blank.

Rail: Right, it's a figure-ground painting, but it's very complicated and contradicts the way we generally regard figure-ground relationships. And that brings metaphor into play immediately.

Lasker: Of course. That was kind of where these paintings started. They started with the notion of figure against ground. Which is something that was happening in the 70s, a number of artists were involved in that, and that was also an influence on me at that time. If you think of the “New Image” painters of that time, actually one of my teachers at Cal Arts just as I was beginning these paintings was Susan Rothenberg. And there were abstract painters at that time who were dealing with it, like Thornton Willis, and it’s a moment in painting that’s been buried. They were all dealing with issues that were coming up after minimalism, as of course was pattern painting, which was somewhat of an influence on these works. But a lot of these artists, they either discontinued what they were doing or they kind of lost much of their public, they weren’t so visible, I guess I’m the guy that just kind of stuck with the figure-ground issue.

Rail: What about “The Portrait of the Artist’s Mother”? I was thinking of the black as being like a skin over the impasto. And the impasto has become more and more sculptural in a way; relief like.

Lasker: With the impasto being as dense as it is, it’s a very tactile aspect of painting. Meanwhile, the big, thick, black mark is dense in its presence, because you really feel like this thing is being pushed forward, and it seems to have physical presence, and yet when you get closer, this physical presence evaporates and you can see that it’s a thin skin hugging the forms beneath it. Also, one of the things I’ve gotten into more and more over the years, is to make a brush stroke become resonantly a brush stroke, a thing, like to take every characteristic of a brush stroke and bring it to a point of being a caricature of itself, meaning taking those qualities of it which are most immediately salient to the eye, what the eye immediately senses, which is the sense of the brush trailing through the paint, and the sense of the edge of the stroke building up. When I do these brush strokes, I load a brush with a lot of paint and I put some pressure on it and I make sure the edges rise up around the pressure, and I keep working it until that happens significantly in order to create this brush stroke which is resonantly that thing; a brush stroke. And as I’ve done that, the paintings have become more and more tactile.

Rail: At the same time, when you say caricature, you’re not parodying a brushstroke or style.

Lasker: No, it’s not a parody.

Rail: You’ve been seen as an indexical painter. One could say there are different kinds of mark making in your paintings; each exists on its own, and yet none of them are completely independent of each other.

Lasker: That's true. There's a nuance in difference, and these marks tend to seek the extremities of that differentiation, although all of them are the vocabulary of the brush. Over the years as a painter, more and more I've engaged in that kind of differentiation. And that maybe is how you can see one aspect of the ongoing project of these paintings.

Rail: There are indexical painters who're parodying abstract expressionism but I don't see that as something you're interested in.

Lasker: No, not at all. First of all, aside from the fact that I really love abstract expressionism, which is neither here nor there. Whatever the suggestions of that kind of mark making there is in these paintings is not a commentary of that kind of mark making, but the fact that early on when starting these paintings, I used that kind of language because it was readily available. It was a metaphoric and expressive language that I had available to me as a way of countering the emptied out pictured plane that one was dealing with after minimalism. My idea was how could you re-engage that level of expression and metaphor. That language was available and there was no reason not to use it.

Rail: So you don't see these marks as ready-mades either.

Lasker: No, they're very different from any mark. These marks are not ready-mades, but they have a resonance that's culturally available. As a painter I'm satisfied with that, but at the same time it has nothing to do with parody.

Rail: Okay, I just wanted to get that on the record.

Lasker: Well that's a little complex, but they're not meant as ready-mades. One thing that's really important is I never cull quotes from art history, I just don't think in those terms. I mean I use a common language in certain areas, and I often seek to transform that language, so the works are really dealing with transformation.

Rail: I agree with that. Culturally, something suggests a landscape or a figure, as you said earlier, and these paintings are landscapes, interiors, or portraits. So you're using the basic structures that cultures have developed over time to say that this is this and that is that.

Lasker: Well not quite. When I start thinking of a composition, I think how do I make a flat pattern that will suggest a kind of a deep space, I think in terms of horizon lines, I think in terms of vanishing points, etc. So I have that in my mind. And I think of forms, and how they could occupy real

space. But once you start doing that you're going to fall in one of three categories: landscape, interior, or portrait, and many of these paintings could be any of those three; "Reason and Free Will" is all three.

Rail: Those associations and the way you've contradicted them lead into a self-conscious space where, as much as we know, we realize that we can't stick to the historical conventions, that we've got to loosen ourselves from them in order to keep reading the painting.

Lasker: Right. I want the viewer to see him or herself viewing, I want the viewer to see how it is that the subjective side of viewing guides our cognitive reason.

Rail: Let's talk about the model of subjective and objective, because one view of art history proposes that abstract expressionism bifurcated into the objective geometric side and the subjective gestural side. Minimalism claims objectivity as its achievement, and you're saying you can't really have one without the other, that they're both part of the equation of being human. You have this interplay between the objective and the subjective because, as you say, you want the viewer to see himself or herself viewing the painting. There's a dialogue about what is subjectivity? What is objectivity? What is the relationship between the two?

Lasker: Right, initially I thought it was a way of coming to terms with reality, but over the years I've come to see more and more that there really is no absolute means of coming to terms with reality. All of our cognition is shaped by our subjective reception of phenomena, that's inevitable and these paintings are meant to illustrate that. If anything, I'm probably more a fan of the subjective than the objective; I mean these paintings have always been about the conflict between the two. Initially I thought it was about coming to terms with reality or coming to terms with illustrating that, just trying to get at more understanding, which they are, they're about that. I accept the fact that we're inevitably subjective animals, and that almost all of our assumptions are going to be shaped by subjectivity, and I think that that's acceptable, and perhaps even the most inspiring aspect of what it is to be human. That's not to say that we should freefall into a loss of reason, we should try to come to terms with what we think is real, but at a certain point to have to supply assumptions of what's real and that's always going to be subjective, and it's acceptable. I'm a big fan of human consciousness.

Rail: There is this thing that contains us all called reality, but our experience of it is completely different, we could be walking down the same street but you might look at this and I might look at that. If we know this

about ourselves, then what is it that binds us together, or what is it that makes communication possible. Partly it's a set of conventions, but how much do those conventions allow subjectivity to have a real dialogue.

Lasker: There are certain archetypal forms that have resonance. I guess these paintings play with that a little bit. They're not based on archetypes but they have a certain resonance. I think that when a line goes this way or that way it becomes jagged, or it becomes smooth or rounded or fluid, it tends to have a fairly regulated resonance on many people's minds. But you're right; readings can be very very different.

Rail: And I think one thing that has always been interesting about the position you take, is that you're conscious of all the paradigms, or dominant ways that painting is read. And yet it seems to be very clear that you never aligned yourself with a particular theory or narrative.

Lasker: Precisely. I very much believe in the ongoing creative possibilities of painting. That, above and beyond all else, is what you maybe could take from my operation as such, if you're talking about having all of those things that are implicit or even explicit in making a painting today, and yet at the same time I believe that in spite of all of that, one can keep making paintings.

Rail: So it's really how do you stay free of a narrative that's not yours in order to dream, whatever it might be, and at the same time, whatever it might be is not necessarily a narrative.

Lasker: That could be what these paintings are asserting. You're right, when you're talking about a narrative, maybe you're talking about a historic narrative, and then the idea of grand narratives, and I can only think in terms of a very personal narrative at this point. What other painters could take from these paintings in a broader general way, I'm not really sure. I think that some of the more interesting painters today are kind of dealing with a lot of these issues, or most particularly, dealing with the idea of that openness, that you're taking about. And that probably is a historic moment that we're at. I started these paintings to try to find a way to open discourse because I began painting when there was closure around me. And that was what I saw as my task, but I think for younger painters, they might seek a statement that might lead to a closure, or yet a further opening.

Rail: Oh no, not another closure Jonathan, how many will we have to live through?

Lasker: You're right; I would hope not another closure. All the closure that came from the 19th and 20th centuries was thoroughly nihilistic. You're right, I agree with you there.

Rail: Let's get that on record, no more closure.

Lasker: But, only closure to this extent; I like the heroic notion and I like the idea of an artist trying to make a grand statement, that's what I'm saying. Whatever it means, closure, openness, whatever, I would love to see a grand statement if it could be made, but of course that's the challenge, can one be made at this moment?

Rail: There is something workman-like about your paintings, and I don't think you make a big deal about this, but there's the painter as laborer in your work. You don't make a big deal out of it, but you don't deny it either, it's just there.

Lasker: The thing is that I don't do many paintings, because they're very slow, because first there's the linear elements, then there's all that thick paint, it takes a long time to mold those brushstrokes, to create each brushstroke and then at the end of that you are dealing with an image which is art, so there's the labor factor and then there's the art factor, and it takes a lot of concentration.

Rail: I think it's interesting, because the labor factor de-privileges the artist—there's the artist who's the inspired genius, and then there's the artist who's the laborer, but there's a different kind of labor going on in your work, I mean it's like not all labor is the same labor, even if it's all physical.

Lasker: Well there's a workman quality to making these paintings; they're creatively conceived, yet they're also crafted, there's a craft to them. There's both an artist and an artisan quality to the nature of making these paintings. That's also inherent in the process. I start with doing sketches, and then I do studies of the paintings, which are really like miniature paintings, and then I do a freehand version in large scale. And quite often the image changes somewhat and sometimes considerably from the study, and sometimes it's very close to the study, but the study becomes like a plan for the painting. So the most creative imaginative side of the works really is in the sketches, and the notion of the creativity and the imaginative quality gets tighter and tighter as you go from the study into the painting, although it always remains. So by the time I get to the large painting I'm more like an interpretive actor performing a piece, or a classical pianist performing an old piece with a certain amount of

improvisation.

Rail: There's a certain amount of improvisation, and there is a side to your paintings that is performative. This association adds another level to our experience, like the painting exists somewhere that we feel intimately connected to.

Lasker: To it's making. I mean, anybody can doodle a line, there's no question about that. Of course we all doodle in a different way. But that type of mark making is readily available to all of us, that's true.

Rail: Well, one of the things that strike me about the doodling is that it comes as close to being a generic doodle as possible without being generic.

Lasker: But I'm sure that almost anyone else would do these paintings, the filling of the shape would actually have a very different quality. Some people do circular looping shapes, some people do jagged crossing shapes.

Rail: But you don't do a shape that's elaborated, that's what I'm getting at. It always stays what it is, it doesn't become fancy, there are no curlicues, no overt signs of personality. It's like you almost resist elaboration.

Lasker: Well they're subjective but they don't get grand about themselves in that sense. Subjectivity is implicit in these paintings, but it doesn't become very elaborative in that area; it doesn't seek specific personality traits, or become a labyrinth in its meanderings in that area. The shapes and forms present are really interested in interacting with other forms more than they are in watching themselves internally. These paintings are hermeneutic. They're also about objects in space, things declaring their presence, they're interested in existential resonance, and they're connected to metaphysical conjecture.

Rail: "Reason and Free Will" doesn't sit in a particular convention.

Lasker: That's very true. If you really wanted to define these forms as being based on this genre or that genre, you can try to, but go and try and find a corresponding image from that genre that looks exactly like that, you won't be able to find it. The thing is, I myself as a painter have a very strong need to remain creative. And at every point in these paintings, I'm seeking that creativity. I'm seeking my own form, I'm seeking my own way of making forms, and they're not based on previous ways of making forms, but when I paint a biomorphic shape, I do it in such a way that it's really unlike any other that I've seen before, and that's definitely my interest. I'm interested in that transformation, I'm interested in that individual

statement. Creative individuality is of critical importance to me. It's not a meaningless convention to me by any means.

Rail: Creativity is the core of your project, which makes you completely unacademic as an artist.

Lasker: I'm glad you said that.

Rail: There is an academic notion of what's creative and your work doesn't fit those models.

Lasker: There's a theoretical notion of how to create an artwork, and there was no prescribed theory for these paintings as I developed them. And I very rarely get used as an illustration for any of those kinds of theories. Whenever I see a book of art on a bookshelf where there are other treatises about art, and it starts getting into certain theoretical positions, I know that I will not be illustrated in that book. I think theorists really can't stand my work.

Rail: That's important.

Lasker: If I've accomplished that much in life, I'm happy.

Rail: You say that all your paintings come out of small sketches. Where do they come from?

Lasker: They come out of my imagination; I'm thinking, how can I make a picture, and I start composing ideas in my mind of forms developing into my idea of a picture. That's where they begin. I start making marks based on that. At every stage there's something that precedes it, but I think that's the case with almost any artist. I think it's almost mythic that a painter can just start off making a mark on a canvas and develop from there. Actually that idea only starts in abstract expressionism. Until then, people always made studies and sketches; no artist of the 19th century or before would have thought to do a figure or a landscape without doing sketches, it's unthinkable.

Rail: What about language and abstract painting? Critics have tried to populate your forms with language. What language do you think has helped you?

Lasker: I always knew these paintings were somewhat dialectical and discursive, but I never really quite thought of them as language as such. And the thinking of it as being language around the mid 80s when a lot of people were talking about that, it did help me recognize that there was

potential in that reading, and instead of going against that, I accepted that.

Rail: Did you accept it with any caveats?

Lasker: Yeah, like the caveat for example, of some people thinking I'm working with signs from art history in a certain way, but I'm not, I'm finding my own forms. And I would never attempt to paint signs, I paint forms that have resonance. And the resonance becomes a kind of a language and I can understand that, and I think that I feel comfortable with that. But the idea of going into the studio and painting signs, that is definitely a caveat, I would never touch that kind of thinking at all, and I think it would be very destructive to me as a creative artist.

Rail: It's not a sign for something, it is something, is what you're getting at. When you say form, then you're saying it is this thing that it is. Whereas you read it as a sign, it's always something that stands for something else; that's what signs are. And you're not interested in that. You said this language is readily available, and in a way, what you're saying is that abstraction has this long history, and has developed a certain language made up of different parts, and that these parts are available for you to use, but it's like language that we use, words, that they can become fresh depending on how you use them.

Rail: And you're trying to get to a picture that you don't quite understand.

Lasker: Yeah, I mean I have an idea of what I want the picture to do, so I understand my picture in that sense. I understand it as an active object, and that's my understanding of it. But I want it to be open-ended in its interpretations.

Rail: So that alone is about being against closure, because you're trying to get to something that doesn't close down for you, it stays open.

Lasker: The viewer completes the picture as far as I'm concerned, and I want to challenge the viewer and I want the viewer to think through the steps of creating a picture in his or her mind, and to think through the contradictions of the discourse of the works.